



Sociology: That Awkward Age (SSSP Presidential Address, 1971)

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Source: *Social Problems*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Spring, 1972), pp. 431-436

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of the Society for the Study of Social Problems

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/799922>

Accessed: 27-06-2016 05:04 UTC

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SOCIOLOGY: THAT AWKWARD AGE*

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Ten years ago tonight (on the ceremonial calendar, at least) the retiring President of the SSSP read a paper with the compelling title: "Anti-Minotaur: The Myth of a Value Free Sociology." In it, the author argued that sociology is not, cannot be—indeed should not even want to be—ethically neutral in its approach to social data. Five years ago tonight on the same calendar, the presidential address was entitled "Whose Side Are We On?" and dealt at length with the inevitability that sociologists engaged in research will reflect the partisan concerns of one or another group in society. In many respects, these addresses turned out to be a very natural and fitting way to mark the passage of the 1960's, for the issues they drew to the surface played a prominent part in both the private reflections and the public debates of the period.

During the decade, many sociologists began to take a hard new look at the shape of the sociological enterprise itself, partly in response to challenges raised by a younger and more radical generation of students and partly in response to doubts felt by an older and more established generation of scholars. Together, these re-evaluations have resulted in a widespread suspicion that the field is experiencing a number of related crises at the political, moral, and even metaphysical levels. Among these crises is one that might be called the "epistemological crisis"—it takes the form of a recognition that the conceptual underpin-

nings of sociology may be a good deal more slack than most of us have been accustomed to thinking, that our professional house may rest on very soft methodological ground.

What, after all, *is* sociology? At one level, of course, it is a body of knowledge, a repertoire of research methods, a loosely defined territory on the academic map, a collection of literature catalogued separately on the library shelves. But at another level, it is a vague set of suppositions about social life which is absorbed into the tissues of the sociological mind and into the everyday procedures of the field largely out of awareness. This "sociological temper" (if that is the word) is not easy to describe, but it has something to do with the way our imaginations are tuned, our sensitivities are conditioned, our intellectual reflexes are set. And we have been increasingly reminded in recent years that this body of suppositions is shaped in part by a whole range of very human influences—subconscious impulses, cultural values, class biases—which enter into our thinking in ways we can neither understand satisfactorily nor control. They are clearly not subject to anything in the way of objective measure: they are simply there, a reflection of our own human limitations.

Now this insight is familiar enough to sociologists. We have been using it for years to describe the behavior of our subjects and even the theories of our intellectual neighbors. But it has not really trespassed in any rude way on the ordinary routines of the discipline because we have never been required to think about it very much. The epistemological crisis begins, then,

* (Presidential address, presented to the annual meetings of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, Denver, Colorado, 1971)

when we are forced to reconsider the meaning of things we have "known" all along, by a generation of students who enter the field with a different set of assumptions and a different kind of intellectual and emotional reflexes.

This may prove to be a much more difficult challenge than that of fitting new information or new formulations into old and accustomed molds; for we are being asked to live with a degree of uncertainty that scientific disciplines normally (and naturally) resist. We are being asked to make a methodological virtue out of our own doubts.

I

The job of the sociologist—of any scientist, for that matter—is to try to make some kind of systematic sense out of the social universe. Yet the reality we make it our business to study is at first glance little more than a vast blur of movement and noise, a swirling, endless commotion. We know (when we think about it) that men must *learn* to pick individual particles of matter and meaning out of that sprawl of details; and we know that the ways in which the mind is conditioned to make such discriminations leave a good deal of room for subjectivity and bias. Nor can we derive any comfort from the coincidence that other persons in our immediate surround appear to visualize reality just as we do, for this may only mean that their perceptions have been tempered in the same cultural school as our own.

In effect, then, men need to *pre-order* reality before they can apprehend it well enough to *order* it. They need to impose their own sense of patterning on the real world before the world reflects back its own secrets.

And the rub is that we can never be sure to what extent pre-ordering shapes the character of what we later see. The screens we devise to look out at the world are also the filters through which our data flow back to us, and thus we have no way of knowing whether the "findings" we enter into our notebooks are data about the objective world or data about ourselves, whether the orderings we discern are shrewd readings of reality or the mirrored reflection of our own expectations. We have to assume they are both.

Whatever else sociology may claim to be, it is a specialized mode of pre-ordering reality. We have our own particular ways of partitioning the flow of human life into discrete actions and patterns and relationships; and we spend a good deal of time in our workshops teaching apprentices to perceive the flow as we do—to "see" such abstractions as roles and norms and statuses within a continuous field of movement.

The idea behind such an apprenticeship, presumably, is that students will walk back out of the workshop once their training is completed and be able to recapture some sense of the flow and texture of social life as well as of the details that make it up. But it is rarely as simple as that: once the social world has been visualized as an assembly of particles, it is difficult to see it as a continuous whole again. For all of his concern with the integrity and unity of social systems, one of Talcott Parsons' most important lessons to at least my generation of sociologists has been to show how this parcelling out of reality can work as a strategy. In effect, one reaches out into the stream of passing events and brings back discrete items called "var-

iables"—which are then re-assembled like a museum exhibit to simulate the larger flow from which they came. The resulting model, of course, is a thing of layers, connections, tiers, linkages. It is an arrangement of parts rather than a living whole, a mechanism rather than a body. Now this may be the purest form of sociological wisdom, and I do not mean to disparage it for a moment; but it is not the way men experience their own lives or the worlds in which they live. Nor does it pretend to be.

So this (or any other) sociological vision is part observed fact and part projection. It is the way the world looks through a particular kind of intellectual screen, and we are fated never to know whether that vision is born of our readiness to see it or is an accurate reflection of something out there in the real world.

We are fated never to know, that is, until we find better ways to measure the effects that we ourselves introduce into the research situation.

II

Recent critiques of sociology, then, focus attention on something we have really known for a long time—that the sociological enterprise, for all its internal consistencies and balances, nonetheless rests on a soft substratum of human biases and assumptions. This is inconvenient, perhaps, but inescapable; and we can only take what comfort we can from the fact that the older and more confident sciences have known it for years and have learned to regard it as a natural condition of their work.

This realization has brought calls from any number of quarters for a hard assessment of who we are and where we stand—a new effort at self-

awareness, a sociology of sociology, a reflective look at the contours of our own professional world. Students of human interaction should be the first to argue that their results are a joint product of the scenes they observe and the eyes with which they do the observing. At some point in the research process, at least, our own senses are the instruments we use to take readings of reality, and it stands to reason that we should be prepared to take as cold a measure of those instruments as we would an optical lens or any other technical appliance. By definition, too, we are bound to do this work imperfectly, for the eyes we use to examine those instruments have exactly the same defects and astigmatisms as the instruments themselves.

So we might as well accept the fact of our own subjectivity with as much good humour and as little embarrassment as we can, for it is simply one of the conditions under which we—or any scientific community—work. Like all men, we are products of class, creatures of culture, subjects of whim, and it does not make much sense for us to pretend otherwise. With the memory of Karl Marx pressing in on one side asking us to consider what it means to belong to a social class, the memory of Sigmund Freud pressing in on the other urging us to remember what it means to be impelled by unconscious impulses, and our own monographs staring down on us from countless book shelves reminding us what we are supposed to know about the influence of culture on the conduct of men, it seems odd indeed for us to imagine that we can be value free.

It should be noted, though, that the same logic should make us extremely wary of the claim that we can simply

decide what kind of partisan we want to be. We cannot avoid taking sides, perhaps, because we are poor human vessels. But if we really believe in and really accept the proposition that subjective influence can intrude at any point in the research process; and if we really grant that men do not always know the sources of their own bias—then we must conclude that we cannot know what side we are on either. This is hardly a compelling argument for ethical neutrality, but it is a fair enough argument for being cautious when people who speak from an exuberantly committed stance presume to know exactly what their own subjectivities are. If it were really that simple to choose a side, one could choose the side of neutrality.

As we drift into the 1970's, then, the question is not whether sociology can be charged with all the many limitations that flesh is heir to, but how we can live with that fact, learn from that fact, and still get some sound work done. There are no reasons why scientific structures cannot be built on ground as soft as this so long as we know the properties of that ground and make some reasonable allowances for it. This is, of course, why the recent calls for a new evaluation of the field ask us to look first to ourselves.

III

A number of these calls for re-evaluation, however, have been stated with an urgency and stridency that endanger the project from the beginning. For one thing, an undertaking like this requires seasoned reflection, and any attempts to reach instant judgment do not make the most of what is good about sociology. For another, some of those who have been most insistent in their charge that we need to recon-

sider our ways of working and thinking are already convinced that they know how the project will turn out in the long run—and this is not good sociology either. It seems to me that we might want to ponder several matters in this connection.

In the first place, it would be fair for us to establish some ground rules for the undertaking, stating at the outset (if we must) that these rules are as whimsical as anything else we do.

One ground rule might be that sociological criticism is subject to its own logics. A critic may have plausible grounds for thinking that he has gained a measure of insight into why a particular theorist visualizes reality the way he does—his class background, personal history, or whatever—but this is not in any respect at all a comment on the accuracy or wisdom of the theory itself. The discovery that this or that remark can be described as a "rationalization," that this or that theory might have resulted from a class "bias," that this or that view of reality may have an "anarchist" or "chauvinist" ring is a telling but nevertheless a rather limited insight. For one thing, truth and wisdom can issue from the meanest as well as from the purest of motives. For another, it is crucial to remember that the critic, too, is subject to all the passions and vanities he suspects in the work of others, and his criticisms furnish as much data about the workings of *his* mind as they do about the mind of the person he is writing about—a good deal more, in fact, if we are going to be consistent about it. If one person's work can be read as a kind of unconscious biography, then any critique of it can be read in the same skeptical spirit. The dilemma which Mannheim

worried about (and failed to resolve) is that the sociologist of knowledge is in no way exempt from the approach he applies to his subject: he is always, in part, writing about himself.

Another ground rule might be that self-evaluation is not the same thing as self-indictment. A nagging undertone in many of the recent calls for a review of the field seems to suggest that we will not be doing the job properly if we end up with anything less than a sharp sense of our own inadequacy. I think we should reject that implied condition outright. We should be free to assume, if only as a working premise,

that the human eye, with all its warps and astigmatisms, can yet be trained to see more clearly than it does at present;

that it is possible for a sociologist to be middle class and not corrupt, radical and not anti-intellectual, white and not racist, successful by prevailing standards and yet not a servant of prevailing power structures;

that one can observe the fortunes of other men (and perhaps even earn a living thereby) without patronizing or exploiting them;

that it is possible to be whatever one is—frankly and without embarrassment—and still understand something about the social world;

and that the price of appearing to be honest in our attempts at self-evaluation does not necessarily have to be a constant state of mortification.

In the second place, it would be fair for us to lament some of what we are about to lose even as we celebrate its passing. The new mood of self-criticism means that we might be losing some of our innocence, and that is surely a good thing. Still, there is much to be said for the spirit in which sociologists of my generation were introduced to the best thinking of their

elected discipline: we read the “good” books with what might be called a *presumption of wisdom*—a feeling that the ranking elders of the field knew something we did not and that we would be better off for knowing it ourselves. It is true, of course, that presumptions of wisdom bring many readers so close to the tone and content of a thesis that they lose their power to sense its flaws; but it is also true that one has to read a thesis with some initial sympathy before he can understand it at all. Make of it what one will, the fact seems to be that original thinkers in every field usually serve apprenticeships and usually begin by presuming the wisdom of even those theories they later overthrow. The risk of being trapped by an over-brittle paradigm as a result of moving too close to it is probably a good deal less than the risk of working without any disciplinary anchor at all.

In the third place, it is reasonable for us to consider a few of the costs of turning sharply inward and probing our own subjective tissues. One of them, surely, is that the critical spirit can so easily become an invitation to strew the field of sociology with the debris of provisional theories and speculative formulations, all of them reduced to wreckage before they could be exposed to a season or two of reflection. Demolition is easy work.

I am more concerned, though, that the abandonment of our more “scientific” pretenses puts an extraordinary load on our emotional resources; and who is to say that they are made of tougher or more reliable fiber than the old standards they replace? Something very like this crisis has been known at other moments of our history and has gone by the name “antinomianism.” The script involves a group of people

who lose faith in older, more established ways of doing things, and decide to throw away all of the traditional charts with the idea in mind of steering a new course by consulting their own inner sensations. They agree to respect the ecstasies and discontents and visions that well up inside them more than the readings of external instruments, to rely on the intuitions that come from within more than the official guidelines that are posted without. This is certainly a kind of freedom: it means that every person, every thought, every theory is equal to any other, because they have been certified by the most compelling test of all—they *feel* right.

The problem is that this stance rarely, if ever, works: it is undeniable in principle, but impossible in practice. The fact seems to be that in any kind of human gathering, from scientific communities to revolutionary communes, men sooner or later invent measures to ascertain which thoughts and which theories are most fit, most worthy. The problem with antinomianism is that echoes from within are sometimes revelations from God and sometimes the rumblings of a sour stomach, and it is difficult to imagine a human community with families to care for and work to accomplish that does not devote a lot of energy to the

task of trying to distinguish between the two. The result is often another orthodoxy, more brittle and more confining than the old.

This historical parallel may not carry us very far, but the terms in which many of the recent calls for self-awareness have been stated do seem to hint at a new orthodoxy, a new way of measuring which human productions are worthy and which are not.

When self-evaluation threatens to become a *morality* rather than a *method*, an invitation to scoff rather than a source of intellectual discipline, we run the risk of dissipating whatever advantages a scholarly community can furnish its members. Any approach we adopt to social data is bound to be approximate, bound to be false in one sense or another: we may have to live as comfortably as we can with the realization that our visions of reality are a form of myth. But the responsibility of scholars who really think that they can never reach outside their own human limitations is then to ask which approximations, which myths, best suit the business they are about. It is a discouraging prospect at best, but maybe—just maybe—the myth that we are rational can serve us better than the myth that we are anything else.